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Redeeming the Atonement: Girardian Theory

Michelle Kailey

Traditional theories of atonement, which seek to interpret how the death of Jesus on the cross affects salvation, pose significant problems in the lives of women in abusive situations. A theology of the atonement brings with it messages that glorify suffering as redemptive, while at the same time painting God as the author of human violence. As feminist theologian Mary Daly points out, “The qualities that Christianity idealizes especially for women are also those of the victim: sacrificial love, passive acceptance of suffering, humility, meekness, etc. Since these are the qualities idealized in Jesus ‘who died for our sins’ his functioning as a model reinforces the scapegoat syndrome for women.”⁶² And, when those messages migrate to the center of Christianity itself, it is no wonder that the rate of domestic violence is just as high, if not higher, in the church than in secular society. However, the consequences of a theology of the cross are not all negative. In fact, many people, women included, have found the cross to be a source of great encouragement to them. Rebecca Parker writes of the members of her church, “I knew that for some [the cross] was the core Christian message. It told them they were loved, forgiven, and freed.”⁶³ The message of the cross is quite a paradox. Solace for some, suffering for others – what, then, are we to do with the cross?

My proposition is that we search for an atonement theory that is both biblical and nonviolent – one that proclaims the saving power of Jesus while at the same time denouncing the redemptive value of suffering. French scholar René Girard has proposed a theory that has the potential to meet those two requirements. However, Girard’s perception of the atonement will be quite incomprehensible without an understanding of the view he holds about the origin of religion and society. Girard is definitely of the opinion that “One cannot clearly and convincingly explain the reconciliation of God and humanity if one does not understand humanity.”⁶⁴ Therefore, before we can begin to analyze his atonement theory on the basis of

⁶² Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 77

⁶³ Rita Brock and Rebecca Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 29

⁶⁴ Charles Bellinger, *The Genealogy of Violence: Reflections on Creation, Freedom, and Evil*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 142

biblical truth and the experiences of battered women, we must first become fluent in Girardian thought regarding the four parts of society formation: mimetic desire, mimetic rivalry, scapegoating sacrifice, and scapegoating myth.

I. Girardian Theory

Mimetic Desire

René Girard began his studies by examining the history of culture and society. It is from this concentration in the formation and customs of people groups that Girard began to develop his theory of mimetic desire at the root of religion and society. Based on the premise that humans are “continuously subject to blind passions,”⁶⁵ Girard has rejected Rousseau’s ideas of societal formation which say that the state is organized according to social contract and private property. For Girard, man is not fundamentally reasonable and autonomous; rather, mankind desires based on imitation of the other. It is this imitation, or mimesis, that forms human interactions. According to Cheryl Kirk-Duggan, “We learn everything from our alphabet to standards of acceptable behavior by mimicking someone else. We imitate; thus we engage in mimesis.”⁶⁶

An illustration will prove useful in understanding the extent that humans partake in mimetic action:

No biological drive could be more basic than self preservation, and yet human infants supplied with all the necessities of life but deprived of emotive interactions with adults sicken and die at catastrophic rates. It appears we cannot even learn to love ourselves without a subjective model, without another whose affection directed at us we can imitate and make our own....Beyond a rudimentary set of intrinsic drives like hunger, thirst, and sex, we learn to desire what we infer other notable individuals in our circle find desirable.⁶⁷

From the very beginning, humans desire what they infer they should desire. As Michael Kirwan puts it, “The fact is, people do not know what they want – therefore they imitate the desire of others.”⁶⁸ The advertisement industry has capitalized on this methodology. Just look at television commercials as an example. The ads show viewers that other people want to own a Buick or those other kids want to have a Happy Meal. The companies want viewers to think that if other people want one, maybe I should want that too. This is effective advertising because

⁶⁵ Raymund Schwager. *Must There Be Scapegoats? Violence and Redemption in the Bible*. (New York: Crossroad, 2000), 2

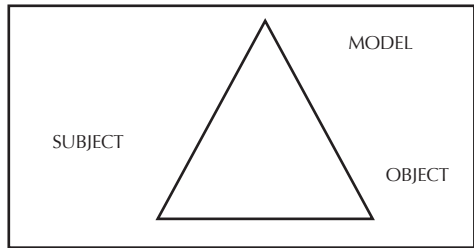
⁶⁶ Cheryl Kirk-Duggan. *Misbegotten Anguish: A Theology of Ethics and Violence*. (Saint Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2001), 29

⁶⁷ Mark Heim. *Saved From Sacrifice*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), 41

⁶⁸ Michael Kirwan. *Discovering Girard*. (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2004), 19

human nature is intrinsically imitative.

Girard further explains that imitative desire is triangular. The subject wants the same object that the model desires, while at the same time attempting to imitate the model himself. For example, Chad (the subject) notices that Luke (the model) wants a promotion (the object) within the company. Therefore, Chad begins to imitate Luke's behavior in order to achieve a promotion, which he deduced was valuable based on Luke's own desire for it. The desire itself is an imitation, and in order to acquire the object, the subject begins to mimic the very behaviors of the model. This is the basis of Girard's theory of mimetic desire.



Girard's model of mimetic desire

Mimetic Rivalry

However, mimesis alone is not necessarily problematic. In fact, mimetic interaction is often how humans learn and develop. Just as a toddler imitates the shape and sound coming from her mother's mouth to learn to speak, so does an athlete mimic the actions of a star player to perfect her game. The reason that these acts of imitation are not dangerous is due to the fact that the object is not in limited quantities. Learning to speak or how to better shoot the basketball are not scarcities. It is when the object is in short supply that conflict arises.

To continue with the previous example, Chad imitating Luke's behavior does not lead to instant conflict. In fact, Luke could even gain satisfaction from being seen as the role model, helping to mentor a younger, less-experienced employee to gain a promotion. However, according to Kirwan, "As soon as the object is cordoned off from this possibility of shared enjoyment...mimesis will lead to competition."⁶⁹ Luke and Chad cannot both receive the promotion, so what was once peaceful mimesis turns into mimetic rivalry. The two are competitors, pitted against the success of the other. Luke attempts to trip Chad up by blocking his progress up the corporate ladder; Chad, still focused on imitating his model, reciprocates the hostile gestures. And so the cycle continues. The competition and hostility between the two rivals escalates until they both seem to lose sight of the original desired object. In other words, "As the rivalry intensifies, the object will

⁶⁹ Kirwan, 20-21.

become less important and the rivals become locked into a fascination with each other in a battle for prestige or recognition."⁷⁰

What was once a simple mimetic relationship quickly turned hostile when the object of desire became scarce or limited. Schwager sums this up nicely by saying, "Imitating the striving of another person...inevitably leads to conflict.... The model immediately becomes a rival."⁷¹ The rivals then become so intent upon their competition to the point that it no longer has anything to do with the once desired object that started the rivalry to begin with. Unchecked, this hostile competition will only continue to escalate to the point of violence.

At this point, hostile gestures are being hurled back and forth between the model and subject. Per our example of an office setting, it would not be hard to imagine the other members of the company picking sides in this fight, choosing which coworker to support. Mark Hiem, a theologian who has done much study of Girardian theory, says this, "a purposeful or accidental injury to one person calls forth a response in kind from the injured party or the party's clan or tribe, which then calls forth in the same turn, until such feuding threatens to consume society."⁷² This may sound extreme, but place this theory in the context of a stereotypical group of middle school girls. If two of the girls in the group are at odds with one another due to a mimetic rivalry, the other girls feel obligated to take sides, to choose one friend over the other. The only way to resolve this large-scale crisis is to absolve the problem. However, the tension cannot simply be forgotten or swept under the rug; the problem will never simply be forgiven and forgotten. The rivals will hold a grudge, only to reinstate the conflict at the next opportune moment. Someone must take the blame for the rivalry in order for the conflict to dissolve.

Scapegoating Sacrifice

In order for the group of friends or the company office, as the case may be, to stay intact and regain the peace that existed before the rivalry, the entire conflict must be perceived as the cause of a third party. This is what Girard calls the scapegoat effect. He defines this action as follows: "the strange process through which two or more people are reconciled at the expense of a third party who appears guilty or responsible for whatever ails, disturbs, or frightens the scapegoaters."⁷³ It is more than just placing the blame on a third party; it is actually

⁷⁰ Kirwan, 42.

⁷¹ Schwager, 46.

⁷² Heim, 42.

⁷³ René Girard, "Mimesis and Violence: Perspectives in Cultural Criticism," in James Williams, ed. *The Girard Reader*. (New York: Crossroads, 1996), 12.

perceiving another individual or group as responsible for the hostility that has been brewing. That the third party is guilty of causing the violence is the one thing that the model and subject, and their respective cohorts of supporters, can agree upon. They all shift their anger and frustration from each other and direct it toward the scapegoat. Kirwan explains this well by saying, "this new mimesis of 'all against one' unites rather than divides. It is the reconciliation and sense of unity of the lynch mobs, as all the violence and hate that they previously directed at one another are now vented upon a single victim. This victim is the embodiment of all evil and appears to the mob to be responsible for the crisis."⁷⁴ A once divided group of people has now united in hatred of the scapegoat.

However, while the problem is now focused on an outsider, it has not been completely absolved. Unless the scapegoat, who is now seen as the epitome of all problems, is sacrificed,⁷⁵ the crisis will not be avoided, only postponed. All of the anger, hatred, and violence that is boiling under the surface is finally unleashed. The scapegoat has become a "resolving mechanism, as it prevents the sacrificing community from turning against itself."⁷⁶ All of the tension needs to be funneled somewhere

The act of sacrificing the outsider brings the rivals (and their supporters) back together. Not only do they find reconciliation in their shared hatred, but they feel peace because their violent urges have found an outlet in being acted out upon the scapegoat. The roots of mimesis can still be seen in this act of sacrifice: "Everyone in the group imitates everyone else's desire to kill. The murderous activity discharges violence against someone who is powerless to resist."⁷⁷ The mimetic hatred and violence is resolved when the scapegoat is sacrificed. Kelly Brown Douglas provides an excellent summary of the act of scapegoating sacrifice by saying the following: "In order to stem the tide of violence 'those involved in this tangle of rivalry turn their frustrated desire against a [single] victim, someone who is blamed, who is identified as an offender causing scandal.' This innocent victim is then violently sacrificed to 'quell the violence' and to curb the rivalrous frenzy of a community."⁷⁸ Whether surprising or not, this method of sacrifice had real social results. It successfully stemmed the tide of violence that threatens to ruin a community.

⁷⁴ Kirwan, 49.

⁷⁵ This could be a literal or figurative sacrifice. The scapegoat could literally be killed or simply ejected from the community – for example, being fired from the company or being kicked off of the sports team.

⁷⁶ Kelly Brown Douglas, *What's Faith Got to Do with It? Black Bodies/Christian Souls*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 57.

⁷⁷ Kirk-Duggan, 35.

⁷⁸ Brown Douglas, 56 quoting Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*.

Historical Evidence

Perhaps a few historical scenarios will help elucidate this concept and show that scapegoating really is an effective social process. Take, for example, the instance of the Black Plague spreading throughout all of Europe during the Middle Ages. In reality, this spread of disease was largely due to common bacteria, yet many minority populations, specifically the Jews and the impoverished, were burned to death for “causing” the outbreak. The fault was laid upon a group of people who were outside the popular majority to prevent the society from turning against itself in aggravation and fear.

Or think about scapegoating in light of the Holocaust. Germany was experiencing widespread economic crisis. Citizens were fighting each other for work to have the ability to support their families. So, when the Nazi’s pointed the blame at the Jews, people turned their frustration on the Jews. The Jewish people were corralled into concentration camps around the Nazi regime, and any Arian caught associating with them (purporting their innocence) was immediately silenced with equal punishment.

The mechanism of scapegoating is not purely a European fashion; finding a more American example does not prove difficult in the least. The “Red Scare” in the United States illustrates the Girard’s theory from start to finish. America and Russia were in a race to have the most arms power, and when Russia’s knowledge of the atomic bomb threatened to usurp America’s position as the world’s super power, the US had to find someone to blame. The finger was pointed at the American communist party, and more specifically Ethel and Julius Rosenberg. Those suspected of communism were put on trial, sent to prison, and often given the death penalty.

All three of these accounts exemplify the power and real-world use that the scapegoating mechanism holds. This is not a method that was only used in ancient times before a government existed to dispense punishment as it was deserved. Scapegoating has been and still is a practice used by people and nations all over the globe to achieve peace in their community. In Girard’s words, “All those unfortunates [the Jews, the poor, the communists] were the indirect victims of internal tension brought about by epidemics of plague and other social disasters for which their persecutors held them responsible.”⁷⁹ In order to dissolve the conflict and spare the community, someone outside of the popular culture has to be sacrificed or cast out of society.

⁷⁹ Robert Hammerton-Kelly, ed. *Violent Origins: Ritual and Killing in Cultural Formation*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), 86.

Scapegoating Myth

On the surface, this act of sacrifice appears extraordinarily violent. Having someone fired from their sole source of income simply because you were fighting over a promotion, per our office example, or, on an historical note, blaming an epidemic caused by bacteria on an entire people group does seem a bit extreme. Why can people not just assume responsibility for their actions instead of passing the blame until someone gets hurt? The answer to that question goes back to Girard's initial premise – that humans are not innately reasonable. They are subject to blind passions and mimetic desire. Even still, one would think that the utter violence of publicly killing an outsider would stop people in their tracks, make them realize that sacrificing an innocent life is not the ideal solution to their problems. Sacrifice does not actually solve the problem; it dissolves the conflict until it cannot readily be recognized.

What is it, then, that keeps people coming back to the method of the scapegoat? Why do individuals and societies not see the acts of brutality they are perpetuating as violent? The answer lies in the paradoxical view of the scapegoat that the perpetrators hold. Schwager illustrates this point more clearly by saying, "The collective unloading of passion onto a scapegoat renders the victim sacred. He or she appears simultaneously accursed and life-bearing."⁸⁰ While the community truly believes the scapegoat is guilty of causing the crisis, they also see the sacrificed outsider as a savior of sorts. After the sacrifice, the rivals reconcile, and peace is restored to the community. This paradox fosters a myth that surrounds the sacrifice. Girard explains, "Myth is a text that has been falsified by the belief of the executioners in the guiltiness of their victim. Myths incorporate the point of view of the community that has been reconciled to itself by the collective murder and is unanimously convinced that this event was a legitimate and sacred action."⁸¹ Because peace has been restored to the community, the act which brought about the calm is considered to be a legitimate action. Soon the memory of violence is replaced by the belief that a justifiable action was taken to restore peace. By the time another crisis develops, the only memory that will exist is that a legitimate sacrifice saved the community. This, then, authorizes the repetition of this sacrificial process.⁸² Sacrifice is seen as a legitimate mean to maintain order in a society.

The reason that a scapegoating sacrifice works is due to the sacrificial myth

⁸⁰ Schwager, 46.

⁸¹ Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* in Williams (1996), 150.

⁸² Heim, 42.

that surrounds it. However, for the myth to be considered successful,⁸³ certain requirements must be met. First of all, the community has to be involved in a mimetic crisis. The society must seem to be on the verge of collapse due to the building tension of the rivalry. Secondly, the scapegoat must be a visible outsider. In order for the community to shift the blame onto a scapegoat, the one chosen must be someone who is not only outside of popular society, but one who is obviously an outsider. In a sense, a scapegoat has to be recognized for living counter to the culture, for not fitting in. Thirdly, all of the people in the community must truly believe that the scapegoat is guilty. If someone dissents and claims that the scapegoat is innocent, doubt could be cast in the mind of the crowd regarding the true nature of the crisis. The sacrifice would then not restore peace within the society. Finally, everyone must be a participant in the sacrificial process. The violence must be initiated by the entire community, lest someone see the true nature of the brutality instead of seeking to legitimate his or her violent actions through the mythical paradox. No one commits homicide; everyone participates in sacrifice. Heim summarizes these requirements by saying, "Sacrifice is successful when no one takes the side of the suffering one, no one thinks that person is innocent, no one withholds participation in the collective violence against the person, no one considers his or her death a murder."⁸⁴

II. Girardian Theory and the Atonement

Jesus as Scapegoat

There are many parallels between Jesus' death and the process of scapegoating sacrifice.⁸⁵ In fact, every requirement for a scapegoat is found present in the Gospels' account of the crucifixion. The most important aspect of this scapegoating process is the presence of widespread turmoil. A scapegoat is not necessary unless the community is in crisis. There has to be so much tension boiling under the surface that if one more thing goes wrong, the entire community will collapse on itself. This type of tension is present in the gospels. During this time period, Israel has been invaded by the Roman Empire. They have been allowed the freedom of religion and the freedom to stay in their own country. However, their power is not their own. The Jews are subject to a debilitating state tax in addition to the mandatory offering to the temple. Often both the tax and offering were exacerbated by the collecting officials in order that they could make a personal profit. The

⁸³ A successful myth would be one which allows the sacrifice to restore peace to the community.

⁸⁴ Heim, 65.

⁸⁵ Mark Heim painstakingly lays out the similarities between the death of Christ and Girard's model of the scapegoat in pages 115-116 of his book, *Saved from Sacrifice*.

people are poor and despairing, caught in a vicious cycle of shifting power; they are losing their land, their dignity, and their way of life. Not only is there an underlying desperation among the Israelites, but there is also a rivalry for power. Israel had been a theocracy, a land whose temple was the religious authority and political authority. However, with Rome stepping in, the political clout shifted from the church to the Roman government. The power has been displaced and taken out of the hands of the temple authority. All of these underlying political and religious issues come to a head during Holy Week, a week of great religious tradition for the Jewish people. The tension pervading the entire community that must exist for a scapegoat to be needed is most definitely present in Israel the week before Jesus' death.

There is a rivalry between the Roman governmental authority and the religious temple authority. Each of them needs to find someone to blame for all of the economic issues that are facing the Jewish nation. The priests cannot blame Rome, lest Rome invade Israel by force and refuse to grant the people any freedoms. Similarly, Rome cannot blame the temple for fear of a religious uprising against the Roman authorities. They need a scapegoat, someone who is visible as an outsider. Jesus is the perfect candidate. Through all of his traveling and preaching in the temple, he is well-known and noticeable. Yet, because of his controversial messages and peasant status, he is an outsider of popular culture.

With the scapegoat found and equally hated by both the Roman authorities and Jewish leaders, all that is left is to convince the community as a whole that Jesus is the root of the tensions in Israel. Both parties accuse Jesus of an evil of extreme proportions; he must be perceived as a threat to the entire community. The Romans charge him with sedition, the highest political crime⁸⁶ while the Jewish authorities indict him for blasphemy, the worst religious crime.⁸⁷ The authorities convince the populous that by committing these acts of treason against the government and God, Jesus is a threat to the well-being of the entire community and must be put to death.

There is unanimity among the crowd about crucifying Jesus. The entire community calls for his death, firmly believing that he is guilty of the crimes he was accused of. Even his own followers were silenced by the crowd. Peter denied Christ three times for fear that if he dissented from the masses, he too would be crucified.⁸⁸ No one proclaims the innocence of Jesus. In fact, Jesus himself says

⁸⁶ Luke 23:2.

⁸⁷ Matthew 26:65-66

⁸⁸ Mark 14:67-71.

nothing in his own defense. Everyone seems to be united in hostility toward the scapegoat.

The final piece of the scapegoating process is a calm that descends upon the community. After the crucifixion, the crowd, who hours before was hostile and literally screaming for the death of Christ, is peaceful and quiet. No one steps forward to condemn the death of an innocent man because everyone believes the crucifixion was justified. And although the followers of Christ still maintained that he was innocent, they are altogether too dejected and fearful of the mob to propose an alternative meaning to his death. Because peace returned to the society, the scapegoat is held in a paradoxical place – simultaneously demonized and deified.

Jesus as Anti-myth

James Alison traces the process of the scapegoat in the Gospels by saying, “The New Testament is exactly the same as all other myths of our planet: a time of crisis, an attempt to save the situation by producing the unanimous expulsion of a victim, and then the semi-legalized lynching of that victim.”⁸⁹ A new atonement theory can be proposed due to the fact that everything necessary for a scapegoating sacrifice is present in the Gospels. Mark Heim explains it this way: “All the pieces [of scapegoating] are *visibly* in place....The passion narratives...highlight what is always in the shadow: the innocence of the scapegoat, the arbitrary and unjust way the victim has been selected, the ulterior purposes sacrifice exists to serve.”⁹⁰ Remember, the myth of the sacrifice hinges on the guilt of the scapegoat. No one senses the innocence of the victim so no one sees the act of violence as unjust. This is why the New Testament account of Jesus is so powerful – it declares the innocence of Jesus by simultaneously uncovering the myth of scapegoating.

When a scapegoating sacrifice is successful, peace is temporarily restored which legitimates the act of sacrifice. However, in the case of Jesus’ sacrifice, a false peace existed only until the resurrection when a new community, which openly proclaimed the innocence of Jesus, was developed – the church. In Heim’s opinion, “The cross decisively demonstrates God’s opposition to this way of solving human division.”⁹¹ God does not want to legitimate the act of scapegoating sacrifice because it corrupts God’s intention for community. So rather than condoning the act of scapegoating, God refused to let Jesus’ sacrifice

⁸⁹ James Alison. *Raising Abel: The Recovery of Eschatological Imagination*. (New York: Crossroad Publishers, 1996), 23.

⁹⁰ Heim, 116.

⁹¹ Heim, 193.

be “successful” in the eyes of the world. God raised Jesus from the dead in a final act of condemning and revealing scapegoating by proving Jesus’ innocence. It’s no wonder, then, why Jesus said “Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives.”⁹² Jesus was offering an eternal peace, not a temporary peace as the result of scapegoating. The church, a community founded in Christ, believes that Jesus came to offer a complete, everlasting peace without the need for a sacrifice every year as was done in the Jewish tradition. Jesus came to end the reliance on sacrifice by offering peace and community in earthly relationships as well as the God-human relationship without the need for suffering.

III. Girardian Critique

In looking at the death of Christ from the perspective of a woman, we stated two criteria that must be met when searching for a new theory of atonement. First, the theory must be biblical, and second, the theory must affirm the life of women. Both measures are equally important; we cannot accept an atonement theory that meets one standard and not the other. So now we have to ask ourselves if this new theory of Jesus as a “failed scapegoat” meets these two conditions.

Biblical Origins

Although Girard’s theory of atonement is a fairly recent development in modern theology⁹³ it still has strong roots in the biblical origins of atonement. For Girard, the fact that the Old Testament literature is riddled with violent narratives⁹⁴ is God beginning the process of uncovering the brutality of the scapegoat. The biblical text does not mince words when discussing violent acts. In the words of Gil Bailie, “These are obviously troubled texts, but what troubles them is truth. Myths exist to spare us the trouble.”⁹⁵ Unlike the misunderstanding that must accompany myth, the Bible is very clear about the violence that was perpetrated by and against the nation of Israel. Mark Heim explains this concept more clearly in the following passage:

What is violence doing in the bible? It is showing us the nature of the mimetic conflict that threatens to destroy human community. It is showing us the religious dynamic of scapegoating sacrifice that arises

⁹² John 14:27.

⁹³ Girard published his first book on mimesis and scapegoating in 1977.

⁹⁴ “Violence plays a prominent role in the Old Testament books. They contain over six hundred passages that explicitly talk about nations, kings, or individuals attacking, destroying, and killing others... The authors do not hesitate to speak of unrestrained violence.” Schwager, 47.

⁹⁵ Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled* in Heim, 67.

to allay such crisis. It is letting us hear the voices of the persecuted victims....It is showing God's judgment (even violent judgment) against violence, and most particularly, God's siding with the outcast victims of scapegoating persecution. The Old Testament is antimyth.⁹⁶

Violence is visible just as God's siding with the victims is clearly visible as well. God is against scapegoating violence from the beginning. In order to see this played out more fully, it will be useful to trace Girard's thought through the entirety of the biblical text.

In the Beginning

Although the first acts of violence occur only chapters into the biblical text, it is important to note that the act of creation was entirely non-violent. As Heim says, "the Genesis creation accounts are a striking exception to the prevalence of violence in the Bible...At this crucial point the bible insists that the true origin is a nonviolent one."⁹⁷ The violence that seems chronic to human nature was not originally part of God's plan. The recurring need for scapegoating did not become a part of society until after what is commonly referred to as "the fall of man." Genesis 3 recounts the first "sin," which is also the first instance of mimetic desire and blame-shifting. Raymund Schwager is quick to point out that, according to the biblical text, Eve does not desire the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil until after the serpent suggested it.⁹⁸ Once the fruit was seen as desirable to someone else, it became worthy of Eve's attention, and likewise for Adam. This original "sin" of mimetic rivalry which led to blame-shifting and expulsion from the garden laid the groundwork for the scapegoating violence that is so prevalent throughout the Hebrew Scriptures.

Rival Relationships

The first act of violence recorded in the biblical text takes place only verses after Adam and Eve have been banished from the garden in the account of Cain and Abel. The two are brothers who both offer some of the fruits of their labor (vegetation from Cain, animal sacrifice from Abel) to God. Both brothers provide an offering to the Lord, yet only Abel receives a blessing. This creates some mimetic rivalry between the brothers. Cain desires God's blessing as well, and his jealousy of Abel's success quickly escalates to a violent tendency. The first mimetic rivalry

⁹⁶ Heim, 103.

⁹⁷ Heim, 70.

⁹⁸ Schwager, 79.

leads to the first act of violence – a premeditated murder. What many scholars find strange is the ending to this story. Rather than God invoking a heavy punishment on Cain for slaying his brother, God instead puts a mark on Cain to protect him from anyone who desires to murder him. Why would God protect rather than punish the perpetrator of the very first violent act of history? According to Girard, “This is the establishment of a differential system, which serves, as always, to discourage mimetic rivalry and generalized conflict.”⁹⁹ God put a mark on Cain to prevent a cycle of violence from occurring. This was God’s way of saying from the very beginning that violence is not a solution to problems

Cain and Abel are only the first of many sets of brothers who have a rivalry that is solved only through expulsion of some sort. The accounts of Jacob and Esau as well as Joseph and his brothers both tell stories of mimetic rivalry which is on a course destined for violence. In the story of Jacob and Esau, mimetic desire plays a large part in the rivalry between the two brothers. Both wish to receive the blessing and birthright from their father. When Jacob gets what Esau cannot have, Esau’s anger quickly turns to violent rage as he plots to kill his brother.¹⁰⁰ The only way for this rivalry to be absolved, is for one brother to remove himself from the situation. Similarly, in the case of Joseph, his siblings were quite jealous of the attention he received from their father. Both parties, Joseph and his brothers, desired something that was of limited quantity – their father’s interest. In order to resolve this crisis, Joseph was expelled from the family when his brothers sold him into slavery. What is important to note in both of these instances is that God provides a hand of protection over those that have been banished from, or sacrificed for, their community. The theme that emanates from God’s action is one that says more violence is not the answer. God is consistently acting in ways to halt more violent activity from occurring.

Rivalries are not simply limited to jealous sets of brothers. In fact, one of the clearest examples of mimetic rivalry is the account of Sarah and Hagar in Genesis 16 and 21. Sarah is unable to conceive a child so she gives her handmaiden, Hagar, to her husband in order that she might have a child through her servant. However, according to the text, after Hagar conceived she began to “despise her mistress.”¹⁰¹ The two were engaged in a mimetic rivalry for status within the household. This rivalry led Sarah to mistreat Hagar to the point that Hagar fled the family in fear for her own safety. The biblical text seems to be full of narratives which tell of rivalries

⁹⁹ Girard. *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* in Williams (1996), 148.

¹⁰⁰ Genesis 27:41.

¹⁰¹ Genesis 16:4-5.

leading to violent behavior. However, God is on the side of the victim as the angel of the Lord meets Hagar in the desert and comforts her. Once again God is on the side of the one who is cast out of the community attempting to put an end to the way humans solve societal problems through violence.

Community Rules

Another example of God standing against scapegoating violence is found in Exodus when God gives the Israelites the Ten Commandments.¹⁰² If the Ten Commandments are examined closely, it is obvious that these rules are forms of building and maintaining a community. While the first four commandments state rules for living in relation to God, the last six dictate regulations for living in community with other people on earth. More specifically, the last five commandments are actually instructions given in an effort to prevent the use of the scapegoat mechanism as a way to solve social problems. The commands against stealing, adultery and coveting are all related to the concept of mimetic desire. If you do not desire what someone else desires, whether that be an object, a spouse, or an authority position, mimetic rivalry will not be an issue threatening to swallow the community. The addition of “do not bear false witness” conveys the message about false victim blame. Placing the guilt on to the head of an innocent scapegoat is specifically condemned by God. Not to mention the blatant command against murder. The entire process of the scapegoat mechanism is forbidden in the Ten Commandments.

However, the rules for community building do not stop after “the Big Ten,” rather they continue several more chapters into the book of Exodus. Rules for responding to personal injuries as well as maintaining distance from other religious cultures fill the next several pages of biblical text. When those rules are examined closely, it is clear once again that God is oppositional to cycles of violence. Exodus 21:23-26¹⁰³ is often a passage that people turn to when claiming God is a violent, bloodthirsty God who condones violence. However, upon closer look it seems this passage of “eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth” limits rather than legitimates violence. God knows man has a propensity towards escalating violence, so God places a strict limit on the desire for revenge. If someone hits you, you cannot kill him or gouge out an eye; your anger must stop at hitting back. The more one retaliates, the more this cycle of violence will perpetuate itself as revenge will

¹⁰² Exodus 20, Deuteronomy 5.

¹⁰³ Exodus 21:23-26: “But if there is a serious injury, you are to take a life for a life, eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, hand for a hand, foot for a foot, burn for a burn, wound for a wound, bruise for a bruise.”

continue to be acted out on both parties until it ends in death. God is ordering a stop to that cycle at a certain point, refusing the sequence to escalate to murder.

A second passage that shows God preempting violence is found in Exodus 23:32-33.¹⁰⁴ At first glance it appears this passage is just God being a jealous God, refusing to let his people worship a foreign divinity. However, Schwager describes the situation this way: “Against mimesis, the Old Testament pits faithfulness....Israel has to choose between mimesis of foreign gods and faithfulness to its own Lord.”¹⁰⁵ Girard’s theory would argue that God is preventing mimetic rivalry between the Israelites and neighboring peoples. Rather than becoming like another tribe and beginning to desire the things they desire, God’s people were commissioned to be different, to be faithful to their own divinity and none other.

Sacrifice

Throughout the history of Israel there are several instances where God is seen standing against the process of scapegoating sacrifice as the result of mimetic rivalry. One is the actual institution of animal sacrifice in the book of Leviticus. Rather than allowing people to direct their blame and violent urges toward other humans, God established a system of animal sacrifice for the people of Israel. The sacrifices were instituted to take the payment for breaking one of the rules established in Exodus – rules we have already established as regulations for limiting mimetic rivalry. Levitical sacrifice was one final way to restrict the scapegoating violence of the people of Israel lest it overtake the community.

These sacrifices also served as a way to subtly expose the sin of scapegoating violence. Specifically, the narrative in Leviticus 16 clearly explains the process of scapegoating through animal sacrifices.¹⁰⁶ First, the priest places all of the sins of the community on the head of the goat just as a society lays blame for the crisis completely at the feet of the scapegoat. Then the goat is sent into the desert just as a scapegoat is entirely removed from the community. Not only has God instituted a practice to prevent the act of human scapegoating, but God also begins to uncover the sacrificial process that societies use to solve problems.

Prophets

Unfortunately this process of animal sacrifice was unsuccessful in preventing men from engaging in mimetic rivalry and scapegoating sacrifice. A brief example can be found in the stories of the Kings of Israel. In the narrative of King Saul and David, Saul desires the attention and status that David has gained

¹⁰⁴ Exodus 23:32-33: “Do not make a covenant with [foreign people] or their gods. Do not let them live in your land, or they will cause you to sin against me, because the worship of their gods will certainly be a snare for you.”

¹⁰⁵ Schwager, 112.

¹⁰⁶ Leviticus 16:20-22.

from slaying the giant Philistine, Goliath. His mimetic desire leads him to attempt to murder David multiple times, though, due to God's protection of David, Saul's attempts ultimately fail.¹⁰⁷ Due to this account, and many more like it, God sent the prophets to warn the people of their sin of scapegoating violence.

In reading the books of the prophets, it seems clear that these men understood the actions that propelled the process of scapegoating. Passages such as Hosea 4:2 and Micah 7:2¹⁰⁸ illustrate the prophets understanding of escalating violence. Isaiah in particular calls out the process of scapegoating by saying, "Their feet run to evil and they make haste to shed innocent blood."¹⁰⁹ Human sin quickly escalates into violence which can engulf the entire community and "require" a scapegoat. Murder and innocent bloodshed are the constant end-game to social misdeeds. Through the prophets, God is once again taking a stand to this solution to social problems.

Another passage that places God in opposition to sacrifice is Hosea 6:6, which says, "For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." Schwager interprets this passage through a Girardian lens in saying, "Sacrifices belong to the realm of violence. Opposed to that realm stands the kingdom of love and knowledge of God."¹¹⁰ This is what the prophets were tasked to communicate to the people of Israel: a true knowledge of God calls out against the process of scapegoating sacrifice.

Gospels

Ultimately, the prophets were unable to turn the hearts of the people of Israel away from violence and toward the love of God. Therefore God took one more drastic measure to eradicate the scapegoat mechanism once and for all – God sent Jesus to overcome the power of scapegoating. Through their explicit detail, the passion narratives serve to undermine the power of scapegoating violence by uncovering the myth and innocence of the victim. According to Girard, "This mechanism is nowhere to be found more visible than in the gospels.... Here everything is found black and white, and even in four different texts at the same time. For the fundamental mechanism of violence to be effective, it has to remain hidden. But here it is completely unmasked."¹¹¹ The authors of the gospels defy the power that the scapegoating mechanism has held over society.

A detail that illustrates this point is the ripping of the temple curtain. According to Heim, "The rending of the curtain in the temple, the screen behind

¹⁰⁷ 1 Samuel 18-19.

¹⁰⁸ Hosea 4:2 "There is swearing, lying, killing, stealing, and committing adultery; they break all bounds and murder follows murder."
Micah 7:2 "The godly man has perished from the earth and there is none upright among men; they all lie in wait for blood..."

¹⁰⁹ Isaiah 59:7.

¹¹⁰ Schwager, 88.

¹¹¹ Girard in Schwager.

which the most sacred ritual sacrifice is offered, clearly means to imply some unveiling of the sacrificial practice."¹¹² Jesus' death did unveil the evil found in sacrifice. The destruction of the curtain simply further emphasizes the purpose behind the death of Christ.

Paul and Hebrews

Paul is no exception to this theme of God standing against scapegoating violence. This is seen nowhere more clearly than in the account of his conversion on the road to Damascus. Before encountering Jesus, Paul was in the practice of persecuting the new Christians. Acts 9:1 describes him as "breathing murderous threats against the Lord's disciples." He was engaged in societal scapegoating, blaming the Church for the unrest between the Jews and Romans. However, after meeting Jesus on his way to Damascus, his heart is changed and rather than persecuting new believers, he served as a tool to encourage them. As inspirational as this story may be, it is the way in which Paul encounters Christ that is most important. When Paul asks who he speaking with on the road, Jesus identifies himself with those he is persecuting. As Heim explains it, "For Paul, to accept Jesus is to be converted from scapegoating persecution to identify with those against whom he practiced it."¹¹³ Jesus reveals himself as the innocent victim whom the scapegoating mechanism murdered in the hunt for peace. Paul was converted as the myth of the scapegoat was revealed as false.

The book of Hebrews also serves to connect Jesus with the persecuted victims by "mapping the crucifixion against the yearly sacrificial ritual of atonement for sin at the temple."¹¹⁴ Hebrews paints Jesus not just as another sacrifice, but as the sacrifice to end sacrifice. He endured the mechanism of the scapegoat at the hands of the people not to perpetuate it year after year like the temple sacrifices, but to overcome it once and for all.

Biblical Theory

In the words of Schwager, "It should be obvious that Girard's theory furnishes a very useful hermeneutic for seeing the biblical writings in a new light, and for acquiring a better understanding of the inner unity of the great theme of the Old and New Testament."¹¹⁵ From the brief summary of text that has been provided, it is easy to see that this theory for understanding the atonement can be traced through the entirety of the Bible, connecting the visible violence of the Old Testament to the merciful, loving God in the New Testament. In fact,

¹¹² Heim, 127.

¹¹³ Heim, 139.

¹¹⁴ Heim, 194.

¹¹⁵ Schwager, 228.

all of the biblical texts that were influential in shaping the classical atonement theories – Old Testament sacrifice and prophets, the Gospels, Paul, and the book of Hebrews – are also formative in Girard's own understanding of the atonement. It seems that this theory is grounded in biblical text, meaning it meets the first of our two criteria in our search for a non-violent theory of the atonement.

Life-Affirming

The second criterion an atonement theory must meet according to our standards is that the theory must affirm the life experience of women. We've already established that the theory is biblical; its roots are deeply embedded in the biblical tradition. However, is this new theory able to proclaim the saving power of Christ while renouncing the redemptive power of suffering? The answer is a resounding yes. Jesus came not to perpetuate the process of scapegoating, but to condemn it. Through his resurrection, he uncovered the myth of sacrifice and proved once and for all that violence is not salvific. Death is the punishment for sin, not the payment for salvation.¹¹⁶

Many women in situations of domestic violence find reasons to blame themselves. *Dinner wasn't on the table on time; I deserved that beating. It's my fault that he is so angry; I couldn't keep the babies quiet.* Thoughts such as those can be extremely dangerous and detrimental for a battered woman. It is participating in victim blame, which is exactly the type of blame that perpetuates scapegoating. In the words of Christine Gurdorf, "it is important that Christians probe this question of if, and when, victim-blaming can ever be legitimate, since we know from the cross that not all victims are blameworthy."¹¹⁷ This theology of the cross condemns blaming an innocent victim, which is exceptionally relevant for abused women.

Furthermore, this new theory of atonement condemns passive suffering as well as victim-blame. Heim states, "To submit passively to the sacrificial mechanism would do nothing to change it. Jesus did not submit passively. He condemned victimization of the innocent."¹¹⁸ Unlike the Moral Influence theory which paints Jesus as a passive acceptor of his fate, Girard's theory tells of Jesus harshly condemning the way the world has corrupted community. Jesus does not quietly accept his abuse in hopes of changing the hearts of his abusers. Rather, he publicly denounces the violence and calls out this violent method of problem solving.

Arguably the most important aspect of this atonement theory as it concerns

¹¹⁶ Romans 3:23.

¹¹⁷ Christine Gurdorf, *Victimization: Examining Christian Complicity*. (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992), 76.

¹¹⁸ Heim, 195.

the life of battered women is the fact that redemptive violence is condemned. In overcoming the scapegoat mechanism, Jesus professes that violence and suffering do not bring real peace or salvation. Brutality is not a way to solve problems. This affirms the sanctity of a woman's life, and, unlike the traditional theories of atonement, encourages her to seek a way out of a situation of abuse.

Mark Heim summarizes this atonement theory well by saying, "God breaks the grip of the scapegoating by stepping into the place of a victim, becoming a victim who cannot be hidden or mythologized. God acts not to affirm the suffering of the innocent once as the price of peace, but to reverse it."¹¹⁹ Although Jesus steps into the shoes of a victim, that does not mean that suffering and violence are condoned or encouraged. Rather it is entirely the opposite. In exposing the futility of the scapegoating mechanism, the death of Christ condemns suffering as a redemptive or reconciling act.

Conclusion: Redeeming the Atonement

Despite the many theories that surround the death of Christ, Christians are often quick to align themselves with a theology of the cross. Heim is quick to point out, "The church has not been mistaken to place itself under the sign of the cross, uncomfortable as it is to live in that shadow. There is truth there, profound and saving, but also paradoxical and difficult."¹²⁰ Heim's explanation of the cross as a paradox is an important one. For some, the atonement is good – communicating worth, value and compassion. Yet for others, the cross is oppressive – legitimating abuse and victimization. So how are we supposed to account for the good, the bad, and the ugly of a theology that is at the very core of the Christian tradition?

Because traditional theories of atonement explain Jesus' death as a gift from God, many individuals find self-worth in a theology of the cross. The fact that God was willing to sacrifice Christ shows the immense love of a Creator for his or her own creation. To once again quote Mark Heim: "[Some] see an unexpected and extraordinary affirmation of their individual worth. That Christ, that God, was willing to suffer and die specifically for them is a message of hope and self-respect."¹²¹ This interpretation of the cross gives individuals a sense of identity. And it has, on occasion, centered a battered woman so fully in the love of God that she is able to recognize the injustice of her situation and remove herself from the violence in her own home. However, more often than not, the other side of the paradox is seen. Rather than encouraging compassion for the persecuted, the cross has been used as a tool of oppression and a legitimation of violence.¹²²

¹¹⁹ Heim, 194.

¹²⁰ Heim, 7.

¹²¹ Heim, 31.

¹²² Heim, 32-33.

As stated earlier, many women see the atonement as the reason to remain in their situations of abuse, rather than a reason to leave.

Not only is the atonement a paradox, including both positive and negative elements, but it is also the doctrine at the heart of Christianity. We cannot just abandon the concept of the cross; that would be tantamount to forsaking the entire Christian faith. Yet at the same time, it is also obvious that many theories of the atonement have been complicit in many situations of oppression, particularly in legitimating the victimization of battered women. Since we cannot, and do not desire to, throw out a doctrine of the cross, it is important that we find a new way of conceptualizing the death of Christ that can remain true to the faith as well as women's experiences.

Where the traditional theories of atonement condone suffering as redemptive, legitimating the violence endured by battered women, the theory Girard proposes refutes that claim. He argues that the death of Christ was an act of opposition to seeing violence as a way of solving social crises. In this way, Girard's theory of atonement affirms the sanctity of a woman's body as it refutes the redemptive qualities of suffering.

However, the difficulty for any theory of atonement is to remain true to the paradox of the cross.¹²³ A theology of the cross must still encourage compassion and offer an understanding of self-worth. It must still be a theology of salvation. Girard's theory does just that. It maintains the value found in the cross while negating the harmful influences. According to Heim, "[Girard's] perspective reaffirms traditional convictions on the saving significance of the cross and orthodox views of Jesus' divinity, [while] it just as strongly condemns much of the church's theology and practice as distorted."¹²⁴ This theory of Jesus as overcoming the scapegoat mechanism both affirms the biblical theology of salvation through Jesus and denounces the negative ways in which this theory has been used to purport violence. Paradox intact, Girard's theory of atonement is a way to view the cross that holds true to both the Christian tradition and to experiences of battered women.

¹²³ Heim, 192.

¹²⁴ Heim, 14.

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